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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000829

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM SOCI KISL BA  
SUBJECT: NORTHERN CITY: BAHRAIN'S NEXT SECTARIAN  
CONTROVERSY?

REF: MANAMA 810

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Christopher Henzel for reasons 1.  
4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (SBU) Many in Bahrain's Shi'a community are watching the Northern City land reclamation and public housing project closely amidst rumors that the government intends to populate the development with Sunnis. GOB officials deny the charges, but are convincing few Shi'a. End summary.

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Northern City  
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¶2. (C) The Northern City project is the subject of much rumor and speculation within the Shi'a community. To be constructed on landfill currently being reclaimed from the sea off Bahrain's predominantly Shi'a north-west coast, the first phase of the project will house about 1,500 families in subsidized villas and flats starting early in 2008. The government plans to build as many as 15,000 dwellings there in the coming years. The Shi'a rumor mill has it that the government will give most of the subsidized housing in this new development to Sunni Bahrainis, or, even more provocative in Shi'a eyes, to naturalized Sunnis.

¶3. (U) Ma'amoon Al-Moayyed, rapporteur of the Crown Prince's Buildings and Housing Committee and supervisor of the Northern City Project, told media recently that foreigners would be allowed to own property in the Northern City development. This fed the suspicions of those Shi'a who believe the government will attempt to pack the new area with Sunnis. Northern Municipality Council Chairman Yousif Al-Boori responded in the press by denouncing any foreign ownership, reminding Al-Moayyed of the Crown Prince's statement announcing the project in 2005 that the Northern City development "is for the sons of the Northern Governorate."

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Perception Is Key  
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¶4. (SBU) Mansoor Al-Jamri, the secular Shi'a editor of Al-Wasat newspaper, discussed sectarianism with Charge August 120. Following on comments reported reftel, Al-Jamri said the Shi'a community, both its leadership and its "street", remain focused on internal issues. Events in Iraq or Iran were less likely to touch off trouble than some unpredictable local incident, "say a fire in a Shi'a religious meeting place" or a "more predictable one" like controversy over the Northern

City public housing project. Al-Jamri explained that it may not matter whether the rumors are true; many Shi'a would not be convinced by the government on this issue.

¶ 15. (C) Al-Jamri said that Wifaq and other Shi'a participating in the political process are discredited by issues like the Northern City, or the regular disputes between Shi'a villagers and Sunni (often Al-Khalifa) landowners. Al-Jamri, though himself a key advocate for Wifaq's parliamentary approach toward securing Shi'a interests, said "most Shi'a now regard Wifaq as a joke." He remained hopeful, however, that "wiser elements in the ruling family", including the King and Crown Prince Salman, would "let Wifaq have a couple of victories" and regain some of its support on the Shi'a street.

¶ 16. (C) Wifaq activist Saeed Al-Majid echoed this view to Pol/Econ Chief August 23. He complained that his group has not been able to demonstrate much in the way of tangible benefits to its supporters. In turn, he fears more Wifaq supporters may begin to question Wifaq's decision to come in from the political cold, and begin to look to the unregistered Al-Haq movement as the champion of the Shi'a cause in Bahrain.

¶ 17. (C) Dr. Jassim Hussein, a Wifaq member of parliament, told Charge he also believed most Shi'a were expecting to be underrepresented in the Northern City. He said Shi'a are convinced that the government favored native and naturalized Sunnis with subsidized dwellings in the large Hamad Town project in the 1980s and are ready to believe it is happening again.

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Comment

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¶ 18. (C) The rumors surrounding the Northern City are a reminder that most of Bahrain's Shi'a remain dissatisfied with their place in Bahrain's current political and economic order. The moves in recent years toward broader political participation and freer media have channeled the political energies of many Shi'a in constructive directions, but many others complain that their chief grievance - the perception that the state serves Sunni interests at their expense - remains unaddressed. The success of the GOB's democratization project depends on convincing more Shi'a that participation in the parliamentary system will produce results for them.

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